

Quality Meals

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Set Quality Standards for Food

Set standards not only for taste, but also for appearance, texture, and temperature. In doing this, consider the children's ages and preferences—for example, some children like their pizza crust thicker and chewier than others.

Listen to what children have to say about the food and watch their actions and reactions. Also, watch to see what foods they end up throwing away.



As you work to set quality standards...

- **Use proven recipes and good quality ingredients.** Before serving a new item, plan the procedures for preparing it. Make sure all new food items are tasted before they are served.
- **Keep quality in mind.** Check daily to be sure top quality is maintained. You will not be able to serve quality meals if your suppliers give you inferior products. Prior to sending out bids or getting price quotations, review potential suppliers to ensure they are as concerned as you are about quality. If you are receiving meals from a vendor, make sure the company has the same standard of quality as you do.
- **Use good judgment about cooking times and preparation techniques.** Know how to test for top quality by smell, sight, taste, and temperature.
- **Understand basic differences between home cooking and institutional cooking.** These include, among other things, differences in quantities, temperatures, cooking times, equipment, and procedures (such as working with pre-cooked portions, and staggering cooking and holding times).
- **Understand the importance of food safety.** Understand that food safety is important at *every* step—from purchasing and receiving, to storing, handling, preparing, cooking, serving, and storing leftovers. *See Appendix J for more information about food safety and sanitation.*

Serve Quality Food

The items you serve to children are only as good as the quality of ingredients put into each recipe. To ensure first-rate results: (1) purchase the finest quality possible; (2) store and handle carefully; (3) check your cooking techniques.

How can you ensure quality?

- **Carefully select how you will prepare and hold each food.** For example, plan to cook vegetables in batches and avoid holding for more than 15 to 20 minutes before serving. This will help retain flavor, color, and nutrients.
- **Do not overcook.** Accidents and mistakes happen. But if a food burns or falls short in other ways, don't make the second mistake of serving that food. Overcooking can also cause food to lose nutritional value.
- **Always taste before serving.** Make sure food has been prepared and seasoned to appeal to children and not adults.
- **Keep foods at the proper temperature.** Keep hot foods hot (140°F and above) and cold foods cold (below 40°F). Proper temperatures are important for food safety as well as taste and appearance. Cool hot foods slightly just before serving to young children. *See Appendix J for more information about food safety.*
- **Feature freshness!** For example, serve salad greens that are crisp and green.
- **Serve eye-appealing foods.** Like adults, children notice and are influenced by how foods look.



Choose Healthy Preparation Techniques

There is no one right way to cook a particular food. However, certain techniques can help you achieve a desired result, such as minimizing nutrient loss or enhancing flavor without adding a lot of fat.

Here are some tips...

- **It is important to retain nutrients during preparation and cooking.** Consider the merits of various cooking techniques and select carefully.
- **When no fat is added, baking is a great lowfat cooking method.** Baking on a rack—or draining the fat after baking—helps make meat, poultry, and fish even lower in fat.
- **Steam cooking is another no-fat method and is versatile and quick.** It produces a high quality product without extra fat. It also minimizes nutrient loss. For example, steamed vegetables generally retain more vitamin C than boiled vegetables.



Protect the Nutrients in Food

No matter how careful you are, food preparation of any kind destroys some nutrients. Excessive losses, however, can be reduced through proper preparation techniques.

How can you help prevent nutrient loss?

Water-soluble vitamins such as vitamin C and the B vitamins are easily destroyed by excess water, air, heat, and light. They are also affected by the pH balance (i.e., too much or too little acid) of the cooking liquid. Fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E, and K are more stable.

To avoid losing nutrients, be careful with:

- **Water.** Soaking food in water dissolves water-soluble vitamins and minerals. Avoid it except when absolutely necessary. If foods, such as vegetables, must be soaked or remain in water during cooking, use as small amount of water as possible and use the leftover cooking liquid in soup or in another product. Or steam vegetables in small batches for best quality.
- **Heat.** Heating food causes nutrient loss, especially vitamin C. Avoid prolonged overcooking.
- **Light.** Milk is an excellent source of riboflavin; but if it is allowed to stand open or is exposed to light, considerable destruction of riboflavin can occur. A light-obstructing container, such as a cardboard carton, can help prevent this. If you are using another type of container, be sure to store it away from light.
- **pH Balance.** Baking soda should *not* be added to green vegetables to retain color during cooking or to dry peas and beans to decrease cooking time. Baking soda makes the cooking water alkaline, destroying thiamin and vitamin C.

- **Air.** Vitamins A, C, E, K, and the B vitamins—are destroyed by exposure to air.
To reduce nutrient loss:
Cut and cook vegetables in pieces that are as large as possible.
Store foods with proper covers.
Cook vegetables as soon as possible after cutting.
Cook vegetables until “just tender.”
Prepare food as close to serving time as possible.
Serve raw vegetables when possible.

When cooking with grains...

Health experts encourage Americans to choose grains and breads as a major component of a nutritious diet. This is why grains and breads form the base of the USDA Food Guide Pyramid. To provide maximum benefit, they must be prepared correctly.

To retain the nutrients in grains, remember:

- Rice should not be washed before cooking. Rice is enriched by spraying with vitamins and minerals. When you wash rice, the enrichment is washed off.
- Browning uncooked rice before adding water can destroy a lot of the thiamin content.
- Rinsing cooked grains and pasta causes considerable loss of nutrients and is not recommended.



When preparing fruits and vegetables...

Because of advances in food technology, fruits and vegetables are available in many forms—fresh, frozen, or canned; whole or pre-cut; bulk or pre-portioned. In any form, fruits and vegetables need to be handled and stored correctly to retain nutrients and ensure food safety.

For best results when cooking vegetables:

- **Prepare small amounts.** Avoid long exposure to heat. Fresh or frozen vegetables can be cooked by several different methods. You can steam, bake, or sauté them. Regardless of the cooking method you choose, it is better to prepare small amounts than to cook single large batches. Nutritive value is lost and quality is lowered with long exposure to heat.
- **To retain nutrients and bright colors, cook “just until tender.”** Steaming is a good way to cook vegetables.
- **Use carefully timed “batch cooking” to avoid having vegetables held too long before serving.** A good rule of thumb: the quantity you cook should not exceed the amount you can serve in 15 minutes. This applies to both vegetables served alone and to vegetables used in recipes such as beef or chicken stir-fry.



